

The Manhattan Institute's Center for Rethinking Development

Ideas that shape the city's planning, housing, and development

Monthly Newsletter



A Town without Churches?

Julia Vitullo-Martin, *December 2007*

What would New York neighborhoods be like without their churches and synagogues? If current development trends continue, New Yorkers will soon find out.



The sale of a parking lot to a residential developer paid for the restoration of the 1842 church of St. Theresa's.

Nearly every neighborhood in every borough is anchored by a house of worship—a church, synagogue, mosque, or temple probably built by our immigrant ancestors.

Yet many of

the most historic and beautiful ones are crumbling, due to soaring maintenance costs, changing demographics, and declining religious attendance. Even as their buildings disintegrate, congregants are increasingly being offered a way out by developers. A celebrated example is St. Theresa's, at 10 Rutgers Street, in Lower Manhattan. When its vaulted ceiling collapsed in 1995, St. Theresa's looked doomed. But by selling air rights and a parking lot next door to developers, who built a market-rate apartment building, the parish was able to finance the renovation of its 1842 Gothic church.

Most congregations, however, take the simpler, cheaper, more lucrative route of demolition and new construction.

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And this keeps occurring with little or no opposition from city officials, including those charged with preserving landmarks.

SO MANY BUILDINGS, SO FEW CONGREGANTS

Once among the wealthiest and most powerful of New Yorkers, the Presbyterians have seen their membership decline to fewer than 18,000—nearly all of whom belong to just a handful of the Presbytery's 98 congregations, leaving the others in deep financial trouble. For them, financial rescue by **New York's strong real estate market** would be alluringly easy. The deteriorating 123-year-old West-Park Presbyterian Church, at the corner of 86th Street and Amsterdam Avenue on the Upper West Side, for example, stands on real estate worth some \$45 million.

The Archdiocese of New York, whose

empire includes 405 parishes in 10 counties, which are home to over 2.5 million Catholics, has closed dozens of churches and schools—often over the bitter protests of parishioners. Part of the problem is what the archdiocese calls

misalignment: Catholic churches in the suburbs frequently have high attendance, while many urban parishes struggle. In January 2007 the archdiocese issued a "realignment" plan that declined to offer a reprieve to six historic churches—four in Manhattan, one in the Bronx, and one in Staten Island—already slated for demolition.

For reasons known only to themselves, archdiocesan officials refused to so much as meet with a developer, Ken Haron of **Artimus Construction**, who had a plan for saving one of the six, Harlem's St. Thomas the Apostle, by building on an adjacent lot. The archdiocese chose instead to begin demolition of the church, removing the stained-glass



West-Park Presbyterian Church sits on real estate worth some \$45 million.

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windows for placement in another parish. Said archdiocesan spokesman Joseph Zwilling, "Our first priority will be to seek other Catholic uses that could be made of the site. Our primary consideration throughout the entire realignment is to continue our ministry even when we close a parish."

If a single entity owned New York's 579 Jewish houses of worship, it would be the largest religious property owner in the city. Since, however, Judaism, unlike Catholicism, lacks a hierarchy that could keep track of how many of them are abandoned and demolished, the breadth of the problem is more difficult to ascertain. The collapse, in 2006, of the gorgeous 19th-century Romanesque sanctuary of the **First Roumanian-American Congregation**, on the Lower East Side, did dramatize the ongoing though undocumented synagogue crisis—particularly in poor neighborhoods.



Harlem's dazzling St. Thomas the Apostle is shrouded in preparation for demolition.

The lack of engagement by city officials, who, after all, are responsible for ensuring that a neighborhood's quality of life will still be good, even if all its blocks are developed to the full

zoning envelope, might have been understandable a few years ago, when the dimensions of the crisis were not yet apparent. Misplaced confidence in the permanence of houses of worship, and the light and air their relatively modest scale permitted, probably lay behind officials' failure to update decades-old zoning regulations. But now every community board district in the city has lost or is about to lose at least one important religious structure, and usually several.

In dense neighborhoods like the West Side, where churches have traditionally been built at major intersections and synagogues are often mid-block, the quality-of-life

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consequences of fully developing their sites will be serious.

Fortunately, the West Side has an extraordinary heritage of community activism, which has been mobilized on behalf of churches before. The congregation of the **Fourth**

Universalist Society church, an 1897 terra cotta building at 76th Street and Central Park West, was "courted by developers in the 1980s for its enormously attractive site," **according to New York Times reporter David Dunlap**.

Despite the temptation, the parishioners turned to their neighbors, forming an alliance called SOUL (Save Our Universalist Landmark). The community pledged to raise the money needed for maintenance and capital improvements, which will ultimately require millions of dollars, and the church promised not to exercise its development rights.

Few other neighborhoods are as active, organized, or wealthy.

"I love the model," says Ann-Isabel Friedman, the director of the Sacred Sites Program at the **New**



The Church of St. Paul & St. Andrew has become a community asset.

York Landmarks Conservancy, a private organization.

"But it can only take you so far." She points to St. Paul and St. Andrew, a United Methodist church at 86th Street and West End Avenue, as a church that solved some of its financial problems by choosing a different course and becoming a "community asset." Charismatic new leadership has helped increase the congregation tremendously, while a partnership with B'nai Jeshurun, which has an energetic, young membership, has produced new revenues and new programming. Partnering arrangements like these are among the many possible solutions shrinking congregations can use to save their architectural patrimony—especially when astutely combined with a full assessment of real estate assets. Similarly, the merger of the First and Second

Church of Christ Scientist made room for the Crenshaw Christian Center to breathe new life into a historic building on Central Park West—a building that almost surely would have been demolished under any other scenario.

AIR RIGHTS, DEVELOPMENT RIGHTS

While most communities cannot raise enough money to deter a church from selling property worth some \$50 million, they can be helpful in supporting other development options, including the ones that depend on complex arrangements. Now that New York is so fully developed, most new building in prime neighborhoods requires some official variance or authorization—from City Planning or the Board of Standards and Appeals or the Department of Buildings. These are more readily given when the neighborhood is supportive—or at least not up in arms in opposition.



Many of New York's 579 Jewish houses of worship are endangered.

And enough houses of worship have been saved by shrewd developers in New York and other cities to show that it can be done. Still, working around a historic

structure is nearly always more difficult than straight demolition since it requires a detailed understanding of the zoning code, the ins and outs of air rights, the possibilities of subsidies and below-market-interest rates through affordable housing programs—and the limitations of the site itself. Thus, Alan Bell, the Hudson Company developer who saved St. Theresa's, says the configuration of the sites on some other historic churches would probably prevent his kind of solution from working. The renowned **1848 church of St. Brigid's**, built across from Tompkins Square Park by refugees from the Irish Famine, has a difficult site without sufficient developable vacant land, he believes. Yet the New York Landmarks Conservancy says they had lined up a developer willing to make a full-market-rate offer for St.

Brigid's—only to be refused by the archdiocese out of hand. Couldn't city officials have been helpful here, encouraging archdiocesan officials to at least discuss the offer? Meanwhile, parishioners pooled their money and ran neighborhood benefits to raise close to a hundred thousand dollars to help their church—now under demolition.

Partnering with a developer is only an option for those houses of worship located on prime or soon-to-be prime real estate—a condition that now extends to some neighborhoods in the outer boroughs. But the process is tricky. Neighborhood activists wanting to save the 108-year-old Bay Ridge United Methodist Church in Brooklyn, for example, worked with a series of housing developers, but in the end came up empty. Ann Friedman notes that part of the problem is that the neighborhood's recent down-zoning prevents the building of a tower. A shrewd developer might still be able to make the site work, but it would be tough.

The Landmarks Conservancy is putting substantial effort into the boroughs, beginning with a survey of historic synagogues in Brooklyn. It has identified about 50 it believes are eligible for the National Register of Historic Places.

WHAT'S NEXT

In contrast to the indifference of local officials, the U.S. Interior Department, in 1999, began funding the restoration of churches, meetinghouses and



The 1867 Glad Tidings Tabernacle at 325 West 33rd Street is being demolished.

synagogues under its **Save America's Treasures** program.

Since 2005, religious buildings listed on the National Register have been eligible for federal funds for repair. Only a handful of New York's hundreds of historic houses of worship are on the register, according to the Landmarks

Conservancy, because most of their owners fear federal restrictions on what they can do with their property. Indeed, most of these owners resist local designation as well. When the Landmarks Commission, a city agency, designated St. Aloysius as well as the Church of All Saints in January 2007, the Landmarks Conservancy pointed out they were the first Roman Catholic churches to be designated in 28 years.

Isn't it time for the Bloomberg administration, with its fine sense of diplomacy and balanced approach to development, to assert leadership by establishing a high-level commission of church leaders, preservationists, developers, financiers, advocates, and city officials? Such a body would both lay out the dimensions of the problem and recommend solutions. If no one does, New York neighborhoods will lose their houses of worship one by one, leaving a sadder, uglier city behind.

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